Deeper Meaning



SRI AUROBINDO KAPALI SHASTRY INSTITUTE OF VEDIC CULTURE #63, 13th Main, 4th Block East, Jayanagar Bangalore – 560 011

Phone: +91-80-26556315 Email: info@vedah.com Web: www.vedah.org



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Symbolism in Rigveda

If we read an English translation of the RV such as the one by Wilson or Griffith, we see that, by and large, it consists either of pedestrian sentences such as, "O Indra, drink the *Soma* and kill *Vrtra*" or enigmatic sentences such as, "The sages smashed the hill by their sound", (1.71.2); "They smashed the hill using the cows", (1.7.3). Many epithets associated with Agni, the fire, make no sense at all. There are only a small number of verses which appear to be wisdom-full. Often, there is no consistency between the several phrases within a single verse, let alone the entire hymn. It is claimed that the translation itself is faithful, but only the tradition of Hindus in assigning wisdom to the RV and its poets is mistaken. This is the view of many Indian academics for more than a century.

If we enquire more closely into the faithfulness of the translation, we get quite a different picture. The basis for all the English translations is the detailed Sanskrit commentary by the great fourteenth century scholar Sayana giving word to word meanings for every word in RV. Without this commentary, no English translation would have been possible. In spite of its many virtues, it has serious defects.

First of all, Sayana was only interested in bringing out the ritual meaning of the verses. He has a penchant for assigning multiple meanings for the same word. The word *go* which occurs in more than one thousand verses is given thirty two different meanings ranging from cow, water, ray, sound etc. We can forget any consistent interpretation of any book if so many meanings are assigned arbitrarily to a single word. For many words, he uses the meaning of food because the verse yields a meaning connected with a ritual. A word like *dhi* can sustain its common meaning of intelligence in all its occurrences. Still Sayana assigns the meaning of food to it quite often.

Next, whenever a verse involving a *deva* like Agni is encountered, Sayana relates an obscure story from the *puranas* to explain the verse. This is highly objectionable because *puranic devas* are quite different from the *devas* in the RV. The *puranic devas* have, on the surface, human qualities of pettiness, jealousy, quarrelsomeness and so on, whereas the Rig *vedic devas* are all of one mind, helpful to the humans. Moreover, *puranas* are posterior to Rigveda.

Thirdly, Sayana uses symbolism whenever it suits him. The often quoted event of Indra killing Vrtra to release waters is rendered as the shattering of the rain bearing clouds resulting in rain. The Occidental translators tolerate it as long as the symbolism is restricted to nature powers. We can add many more observations of this sort.

RV is high-class poetry. It is sheer poverty of imagination to read poetry suppressing symbolism. Veda itself says there is a secret in RV. That secret must

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James L. Price, Reg. No. 27,376; Deepak Malhotra, Reg. No. 33,560; Mark W. Hendricksen, Reg. No. 32,356; David G. Latwesen, Reg. No. 38,533; George G. Grigel, Reg. No. 31,166; Keith D. Grzelak, Reg. No. 37,144; James D. Shaurette, Reg. No. 39,833; Frederick M. Fliegel, Reg. No. 36,138; Donald Brent Kenady, Reg. No. 40,045; James E. Lake, Reg. No. 44,854; Bernard Berman, Reg. No. 37,279; John Beck, Reg. No. 22,833; and Denis Robitaille, Reg. No. 34,098.

Direct all communications to Bernard Berman, at WELLS, ST. JOHN, ROBERTS, GREGORY & MATKIN P.S., 601 W. First Avenue, Suite 1300, Spokane, WA 99201-3828. Telephone: (509) 624-4276; (PTO Customer No. 021567).

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2	Full name of inventor: Donald R. Titterington, Ph.D.
3	Inventor's Signature: While St. Hitherth
4	Date: 83100
5	Residence: Tuakitin, Oregon
6	Citizenship: U.S.
7	Post Office Address: 10185 S.W. Siletz Drive Tualitin, OR 97062
8	
9	* * * * * * * *
10	Full name of inventor: Jeffrey H. Banning, Ph.D.
11	Inventor's Signature:
12	Date: 8 30 00
13	Residence: Hillsboro, Oregon
14	Citizenship: U.S.
15	Post Office Address: 484 N.E. 16 th Ave.
16	Hillsboro, OR 97124
17	